TRANSFER OF JAVANESE CULTURE IN THE PRODUCTION OF ENGLISH UTTERANCES AND ITS POSSIBLE IMPACT ON INTER-CULTURAL INTERACTION

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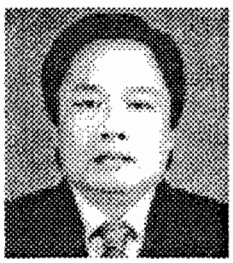

1. Introduction

This brief paper discusses the ways Javanese speaking English produce utterances in English which show transfer and influence from Javanese culture. It argues that cultural transfer from first language has possible negative impact in intercultural interaction. First, some important characteristics of Javanese culture will be discussed, then examples of utterances commonly produced by Javanese speaking English will be given. The writer collected the data from his classroom activities, his personal experience and also from limited studies on the ways Javanese speaking English produce certain acts by using questionnaires. Finally this paper argues that as cultural transfer may influence the smoothness of interaction between Javanese speaking English with speakers English of other cultures and particularly with native speakers of English, it is essential that teachers as well as learners of English in Indonesia should be aware of such cultural transfer and include the discussion of cultural differences in their learning process.

2. Some Important Characteristics of Javanese Culture

Culture and language seems inseparable. Harding and Riley (1986:42) claim that culture influences the habits, customs, way to dress and eat, beliefs and values, ideas and feelings, notions of politeness and beauty. As a consequence of cultural variability, people from different cultures often fail to understand, or misinterpret each other's signal (Finegan, 1992:328). Hofstede (1984; 307-308) proposes four dimensions of cultural difference: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. *Individualism* is opposed to *collectivism* in that as individualist culture it is assumed that any person looks primarily after her/ his own interests and the interests of her/his immediate family such as husband, wife and children, while in a collectivist culture it is argued that any person through birth and possible later events belongs to one or more tight in-groups, from which she/ he cannot detach her/himself. Thus, the extended family, clan or organization protects the interests of members, but in turn expects their permanent loyalty. The *power distance* dimension defines the extent to which less powerful persons in a society accept inequality in authority and consider it normal, while *uncertainty avoidance* relates to the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, and which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behaviour. *Masculinity* is opposed to *femininity*, and the dimension of masculinity relates to the degree of distinction made between what men are expected to do and what wo-

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men are expected to do in a culture. In a masculine culture the rules of men and women are maximally distinct, while in a feminine culture the social rules for the sexes are relatively overlapping.

Hofstede (1986:309-310) describes Indonesia (including Java) culturally into a *large power-distance low individualism, and weak uncertainty-avoidance feminine* category, where status plays a very important role on how communication should be held. In Javanese society, status is connected primarily to social structures, and it is these structures which create and maintain inequality in society. Members of the lower classes realize their position within the social structure and consider it normal to use Javanese high language level to people of higher status, and to let higher status people use lower language level in interactions with them in order to maintain harmony and togetherness. In most collectivist cultures, direct confrontation of another person is considered rude and undesirable. The word *no* is seldom used, because saying *no* is a confrontation: *You may be right* or *We will think about it* are examples of polite ways of turning down a request. In the same vein, the word *yes* should not necessarily be seen as an approval, but as maintenance of the communication line (Hofstede, 1991:58).

In Javanese society, status is closely related to language use (Koentjaraningrat, 1985:15), and status difference normally denotes authority difference. Javanese etiquette makes it imperative for a person first to determine accurately the exact status of the other person before engaging in an interaction. Javanese government officials, for example staff of the agriculture ministry, may use *ngoko* (low level language) and *madya* (middle level language) when conversing with farmers in a village. Farmers, however, have to use *krama* (high level language) to government officials. Attitudes towards status difference are reflected in the system of naming and addressing in Javanese culture (Errington, 1988:112; Soeseno Kartomihardjo,1981:118) .

Some prominent characteristics of Javanese culture include concealing one's feeling towards others, indirectness, avoiding responsibility and attention, and preference for togetherness. These are relevant to an understanding of the way Javanese realize speech acts including refusals in English differently from the way native speakers of English do.

Wierzbicka (1991:100) argues that in Javanese culture it is considered appropriate to conceal one's wishes and one's intentions, particularly if they are in conflict with other people's wishes or desires. Wierzbicka (1991:128) describes this as *not saying what one feels* and the need *to protect one's own equanimity and peace of mind, which could be threatened by an overt expression of feeling*, and proposes that this element of concealment, is typically Javanese.

Related to this cultural predilection to the concealment of feeling is the tendency towards indirectness or *indirection* in Javanese culture because people often do not say directly what they mean (Geertz, 1976: 244). It is therefore crucial in Javanese to get the *rasa* 'feeling' of what people are saying.

Another aspect of Javanese culture, the avoidance of responsibility and attention, is perhaps the most distinct of all. For cultural reasons, Javanese speakers whose first language is Javanese still often consider themselves different from members of other ethnic groups in Indonesia, and frequently prefer to converse with other Javanese people using Javanese, though they are actually able to speak Indonesian (Berman, 1992: 5) because they can express their ideas more comfortably in Javanese. In Javanese, unlike in Indonesian, the interactants can frequently and comfortably use the pronoun *we* instead of*I* (Berman, 1992: 5), as the appropriate form to refer to the speaker who is first person singular. This is perhaps a manifestation of how Javanese "do not like to signal their individuality and avoid being pushy or forcing oneself upon another, thus become the centre of attention" (Berman, 1992: 8) and therefore assume responsibility. Kana (1982: 31-32) observes that avoiding responsibility in connection with the production of refusals is done by using excessive apologies and detailed reasons or justifications as to why refusals have to be made.

Further, Javanese people find it more difficult to refuse interlocutors of higher status. In Java interaction is normally based on the principle of "who you are to me, who I am to you" (Errington, 1988: 106) and to put elders, superiors, and unfamiliar equals and unequals before oneself is highly valued (Errington, 1988: 39). The word *old* normally refers not only to age but also to seniority in various relations (p.69). Speakers and hearers are expected to know their respective status and position before involving themselves in an interaction. This may also occur in Western culture to a lesser extent. Thus, in Javanese culture, wives also usually find it difficult to refuse their husbands' requests, as wives are supposed to respect their husbands, who are assumed to be older than their wives (Koentjaraningrat, 1985: 140), and students normally do not refuse their teachers' requests. Therefore, when somebody who is older or has higher status requests something of those of lower status, or who are younger, the younger or the lower status will find it difficult to refuse. If they do have to refuse, the refusals have to be worded very carefully so as not to offend the requester.

3. Some Examples of Utterances and Cultural Differences

The characteristics of Javanese culture are frequently transferred by Javanese speaking English. Below are some frequently found English utterances typically made by students whose first language is Javanese and live in Javanese culture, which may not be fully compatible with the utterances in the culture of native speakers of English.

3.1 Related to making requests.

Perhaps, influenced by the local culture and the use of language levels (Richards and Sukwiwat, 1983:136), the learners in Java tend to use the formal requests to the people around them to show that they are polite. The common form is **Would you mind** followed by **verbs in the "ing" form**, e.g. : Would you mind explaining that part again? Would you mind giving us the reference book next week? Would you mind telling us what time our class starts next week?

The learners might feel happy because they can use the requests politely, and it is not wrong, but to a visiting lecturer the formality creates a distance which he actually wants to avoid because he wants to interact closer to them.

3.2 Expressing disagreement

The expression of disagreement is normally preceded by an expression of apology or by lowering down or blaming oneself. Direct disagreement especially to the teachers in the classroom is considered extraordinary, unusual and certainly will withdraw other students' attention. Consequently in many occasions the learners say **"I am sorry....."**, or **"I could be wrong but I think ....."** e.g. I am sorry but the president did not say that. (A student expressing disagreement with a visiting teacher) , I could be wrong but I think it is president Kennedy who is the youngest president of the United Sates. (A student disagrees with a statement that President Clinton is the youngest president in America.)

Another way of expressing disagreement is the use of questions: "Did the president really say that?" To western listeners the expressions of disagreement may not sound strong and lack confidence. However, when they disagree with the Indonesian people, and this disagreement is expressed boldly, there will surely be a misunderstanding on the part of the Indonesian speakers.

3.3 Making and accepting complaints.

An Australian mature student would say *I am sorry but this is supposed to be a silent reading area* to a group of undergraduate students who make a noise in the library. The Indonesian learners, in a similar situation, may say: *I am sorry I find it difficult to concentrate on my reading. Would you please reduce the noise?* When complaining they refer to their affected condition first, then follow this with a polite request.

It seems that complaining is not frequently made by Indonesian, unless it is urgent. For the native speakers of English, complaining over improper services or situa-

tions does not seem to affect them deeply or make use of great psychological efforts. The traditional concept of *There will be punishment from the Almighty for those who are unfair to others* still exists at the moment among the Indonesian people, and so there is no urgent need to complaint. The Indonesian learners' reaction upon receiving a complaint would be more than making an apology. They would feel like being accused of having done a serious wrongdoing. They will really feel guilty and may withdraw from further interaction. Interaction would then no longer be natural and warm.

3.4 Making and acknowledging compliments.

Some of the reasons for giving compliments in Indonesia are very different from those in the West. Compliments are for example given because a child is plump, fat, obedient or quiet. It is very common to say *What a beautiful fat boy you have* to a couple. Or *He is really a nice quiet student.* The response is not *Thank you* but expressions such as *Oh, no he often gets flu, actually*, and *Well, sometimes he is making noise, too.* A native speaker would get puzzled when his compliment to an Indonesian student *What a nice jacket you have got* is responded with *Not actually, I bought it cheaply at a sale the other day.* Indonesian learners might be unaware that they may offend their overweight overseas friend when they happily and cheerfully say *You really have big, fresh body. It's wonderful.* Interaction would surely be negatively affected.

3.5 Related to Greetings.

Greetings in Javanese are mostly related to the activities the persons are doing , e.g.: *Just returned from the library?* (Greeting someone outside the library); *Want to see the dean?* (Greeting someone in the lounge near the dean's office); *Are you having a walk?* (Greeting someone around campus); *What do you bring with you?* (Greeting someone carrying stuff in the bag); *Where are you going?* (A very common greeting).

The greetings above may be considered intrusive by the native speakers of English because they have inquisitive elements. An Indonesian trying to be friendly to a foreigner in a bus stop in the city of Wellington, N.Z., and said *Are you going downtown?* was surprised when the response was beyond his expectation: *What's that got to do with you?* The interaction did not continue. *How are you?* may be used to open a conversation in English (Richards, 1986) but in Indonesia *how are you* is normally used when one is really interested in the health of the interlocutor. A native speaker frequently greets with *How are you* to an Indonesian but continues walking or moving leaving him standing even before he completes the response about his condition.

3.6 On expressing refusals

Javanese speakers find it very difficult to say *NO* or to express refusals to commands or requests particularly when the requesters are of higher or equal status. The underlying reluctance is Javanese do not want to hurt their interlocutors by turning down their requests. Their culture is to maintain solidarity and friendship and would do anything in order for them not to lose friendship. While this phenomenon is common in any culture, it is particularly distinct in Javanese culture.

In his study on Javanese refusals in English, Hofstede (1991) found that Javanese culture was transferred in the production of refusals by the excessive use of *terms of address* , expression of apologies such as *forgive*, *regret* and *apologize* particularly to higher status requesters. The use of these words, which Native speakers of English do not normally use, seemed to illustrate the perceptions of JSE that common expressions of apologies, such as *sorry*, were not adequately strong to show their feelings of regret particularly to higher status requesters. This is a reflection of Javanese culture which acknowledges the use of carefully worded expressions normally using high language level to higher status interlocutors.

Further it was found that family related reasons e.g. *I have to stay at home with my wife* and *I have to look after the children* were used and considered more acceptable in a collectivist society, where family values are very strong. These reasons were acknowledged by the requesters and minimiz-

ed the harm caused by refusal. In doing so, the refusers felt absolved from any responsibility because the imperative of the family was so great. Most importantly by successfully minimizing the threat to face, the friendship and togetherness would not be lost. Native speakers of English do not normally use family related reasons to express refusals

4. The Need to Pay Attention to Cultural Differences

Awareness of cultural differences between home culture and the culture of the target language is important for both teachers and learners. If communicating in English means having the ability to express what one wants and intends to say in English, then Indonesian speakers need to understand how to express their ideas in English in a way which can be understood and discerned as appropriate by other speakers of English. In other words, Indonesian speakers have to know how to actually perform acts in English (Richards and Schmidt, 1983:37), and cannot be expected to achieve such communicative competence by studying English grammar only. Grammatical knowledge is only one of the components of language knowledge (Canale and Swain, 1980: 3; Bachman and Palmer, 1996: 67), while culture is important as a component of sociolinguistic knowledge which enables learners to create or interpret language appropriate to a particular language use setting (Bachman and Palmer, 1996: 7; Trosborg, 1995: 11). Such an ability to use English appropriately is crucial since failure to express ideas appropriately and understand what the interlocutors are trying to express may cause misunderstandings and communication breakdown.

Such communication breakdown may occur when learners of second language inappropriately transfer aspects of their culture when they perform acts in a second language through incomplete mastery of the rules of the target language. This type of communication failure which Thomas (1983: 99) refers to as pragmatic failure can be characteristic of even fairly advanced learners (Trosborg, 1995:55). It should therefore be rewarding to investigate the patterns of acts in Javanese as well as in English produced by Javanese native speakers and compare these with the patterns of refusals in English by native speakers of English. The insights gained from such a study will be useful from the viewpoint of English language education and awareness of cultural differences between Javanese speakers and native speakers of English.

5. Conclusion

The cultural differences between Javanese and English in conjunction with the language functions may affect and cause some difficulties in spoken interactions. The English teachers teaching Javanese students should help learners by: explaining the link between certain types of language functions and culture; deepening the learners' understanding of how the two cultures differ; increasing learners' proficiency through well prepared teaching techniques; Increasing the learners' awareness of the cultural differences in spoken interaction by using audio-visual aids through a programmed private study. By increasing the awareness of cultural differences, problems in interaction due to the wide cultural gaps between English and Javanese speakers may be reduced.

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